



Meena Alexander

Biography

Meena Alexander was born in Allahabad, India, on February 17, 1951. She is the eldest of three children. Although christened “Mary Elizabeth,” she has been called Meena since birth. At the age of fifteen, she officially changed her name to Meena. At five years of age, Alexander and her family moved to the Sudan, where she attended school in Khartoum. Alexander learned to read and write early on. She began publishing her poetry (in Arabic translation) at fifteen in Sudanese newspapers.

After going to Nottingham University in Britain to receive her Ph.D., Alexander returned to India to teach at Delhi University, Central Institute of Hyderabad, and Hyderabad University. It was in Hyderabad that she met her future husband, David Lelyveld. In 1979, Alexander and her husband moved to New York City, where they lived with their two children, Adam Kuruvilla Lelyveld and Svati Mariam Lelyveld. Alexander is currently a professor at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

In *Nampally Road*, Alexander focuses on issues of cultural richness, psychological complexity, feminism and social politics. *Nampally Road* is a narrative of minority struggle that focuses on the juxtaposition of past relationships and cultural and historical inheritance. One critic writes: “With its restless crowds, cinemas, shops, temples, mango sellers, cobblers, cafes, and bars, *Nampally Road* becomes a metaphor for contemporary India. Alexander has given us an unsentimental, multifaceted portrait, thankfully remote from that of the British Raj. Her lyrical narrative has the eloquent economy that marks her best poetry. . . Alexander treads the waters of fiction lightly and gracefully” (*Village Voice*).



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1951
- * Raised in India and North Africa
- * Novels and poetry explore Indian-American identity and immigrant experiences

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Biography continued

Alexander's novel *Manhattan Music* is infused with the power of myth, poetry, and the inner life. She explores the crossing of borders from India to Manhattan, the Indian Diaspora, fanaticism, ethnic intolerance, interracial affairs and marriage, and what it means to be an American. One critic says, "Alexander's writing is imbued with a poetic grace shot through with an inner violence. . . . with her gift of heightened sensibility, she can take a tragic, violent situation and juxtapose it with a description of terrible beauty."

Alexander's autobiography, an unraveling of her past, is titled *Fault Lines*. It conveys that, largely as a result of her family's relocations when she was young, Alexander has struggled to forge a sense of identity, despite (or because of) a past full of moves and changes. This book revolves around the theme of establishing one's self and forming an identity independent of one's surroundings. In her autobiography, she writes: "I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing" (3).

Aamer Hussein, a critic and writer who has studied Alexander's work, says that her style of writing is unique: "The language in *Fault Lines* is not the language of a standard memoir. It's not this dry, pared down flat prose - it's an impassioned prose, it's an extension of what she does in her poetry and leads the way to what she does in her fiction. Memory is the glue that links all the fragments together. And it's a memoir that breaks down all those artificial barriers between what is poetic and lyrical; memory, imagination, fictional narrative - it's certainly not a dry, boring autobiography." Alexander's writing is lyrical, poignant, and sensual, dealing with large themes, including fanaticism, ethnic intolerance, terrorism, interracial affairs and marriages. Alexander has given us an unsentimental, multifaceted portrait of what it means to be an American. Her lyrical narratives have the eloquent economy that marks the best poetry.



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